



Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND
EMERGENCY RELIEF COORDINATOR, STEPHEN O'BRIEN**

STATEMENT TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL ON SYRIA

New York, 22 February 2017

As delivered

[Delivered words on the passing of Ambassador Churkin]

Mr. President,

Three years ago - to this day - this Council adopted unanimously resolution 2139. Next month, we will mark a grim anniversary: six years of war that have devastated a nation, its people, its children. Syrians have seen their country reduced to rubble, loved ones killed and injured. The majority of the population – some 13.5 million people – are in dire need of protection and humanitarian assistance. Nearly 85 per cent of Syrians live in poverty, with more than two thirds of the population in either extreme or abject poverty. Over 12.8 million people in Syria require health assistance and more than seven million are food insecure amidst rising prices and food shortages. Households spend up to a quarter of their income just on water. Total wheat production in 2016 was 1.3 million metric tonnes, a reduction of 45 per cent relative to 2015, and 63 per cent relative to pre-crisis levels.

The destruction of essential infrastructure including schools and hospitals, the devaluation of the currency, the impact of sanctions, rising food prices, shortages of fuel and electricity, as well as a lack of clean water has exacted a high toll on the majority of Syrian families and communities throughout the country. In 2016, the rate of displacement continued unabated with an average of over 5,000 people displaced per day between January and December – some more than once. Over half of all Syrians have been forced from their homes since 2011, 6.3 million of whom are internally displaced, more than 4.9 million registered as refugees in neighbouring countries, and nearly 1.2 million Syrians who have applied for asylum in Europe.

Children caught up in this war have fared the worst, killed and maimed, losing parents to the violence, suffering physical and psychological trauma, forced into early marriages and falling years behind in school. Recruitment, very often through indoctrination, abduction, arrest and coercion, has been widespread in all areas, with 90 per cent of 217 surveyed sub-districts in Syria reporting its occurrence. The lack of economic and educational opportunities, experiences of violence, displacement, profound distress, family loss and deprivation of psychosocial needs



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such as a sense of purpose, control and significance, have all been major drivers of vulnerability. Child labour due to widespread devastation of livelihoods and family separation, was reported in 82 per cent of surveyed sub-districts across the country, including its most dangerous and hazardous forms, namely begging, smuggling, scavenging, recruitment and use of children in the conflict, and illicit activities. Moreover, with the war entering its sixth year, 5.82 million children and youth from pre-school to secondary school-age, including over 118,000 Palestine refugee children, are in need of education assistance inside Syria. An estimated 1.75 million children, or almost one third of school-age children between ages 5 and 17, are out of school. A further 1.35 million children are at risk of dropping out. Syria's formal education system has lost a total of 150,000 education personnel and seen 7,400 schools – one in three in the country – damaged, destroyed, or otherwise made inaccessible. And due to severe poverty, parents and caregivers can no longer consider their child's education a priority, with ever-increasing numbers of children remaining out of school to support their households. As we move ahead in 2017, to what I hope will be a year that brings positive change to Syria, we must continue to remember just how much has been lost, and the abyss from which Syria will need to emerge. And let me say this – even if a political agreement were to be found tomorrow – which we all wholeheartedly desire – humanitarian needs will remain critical for months, if not years to come.

Mr. President,

I cannot emphasise strongly enough my support for all efforts to see the guns fall silent. I am, however, concerned about ongoing significant attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, which are conducted with seeming impunity. This includes bombardments and airstrikes in Idleb and Dar'a, and besieged locations in the eastern Ghouta area, most notably in Duma, Harasta, Zamalka, Jobar as well as Arbin.

Earlier this month, the Government of Syria and the Russian Federation announced the opening of several corridors for civilians wishing to leave eastern Ghouta, one of which is through the Al-Wafedeen camp. We are closely monitoring the situation but are concerned that the situation in eastern Ghouta may become even more tense in the coming period should military operations increase. We are also gravely concerned about the situation in the Al-Wa'er neighbourhood of Homs city, which has been exposed to heavy aerial and artillery shelling in recent days, reportedly resulting in more than 20 civilian casualties, many of them children. The shelling also affected Al-Bir hospital, the only semi-functioning medical centre in besieged Al-Waer, as well as the civil defence centre and the ambulance centre, which resulted in the death of one first aid worker. Life in Al Wa'er, which has not been reached by the UN since 26 October, is becoming increasingly dire with tens of thousands of people in need of immediate humanitarian assistance as they have suffered under numerous reported airstrikes in recent weeks.



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To the south, a substantial increase in conflict around Dar'a city was recorded on 12 February 2017. As a precautionary measure, all schools and universities, in both Government and NSAG-controlled areas, have been temporarily closed due to heavy clashes, aerial bombardment, and artillery shelling. On 19 February, the ISIL-affiliate Jaysh Khalid Bin al-Walid (JKBW) commenced an attack on FSA positions on three fronts looking to break out of Yarmouk Valley. Since the morning of 19 February, JKBW has taken over Tseel (est. pop. 34,000), Jlein and Masaken Jlein (est. pop. 9,200), and Edoin (est. pop. 4,900). Most of the population of these villages are now reported to be under curfew limiting the ability of people to flee. Along with FSA affiliates, at least one local council leader have reportedly been beheaded by JKBW in the areas which they have newly taken over. Many NGO staff were unable to flee before the JKBW advance and have now gone radio silent in these villages. Attacks also took place elsewhere in Dar'a Governorate, with airstrikes reportedly hitting six medical centres and health points on 15 February in Saida, Yadouda, Nai'ma, Nasib, Al-Jiza, and Al-Gharia Al-Sharkia, causing severe damage to facilities and rendering some of them out of service. The Al-Balad field hospital in Dar'a appears to also have been hit by an airstrike and rendered out of service.

Due to this increased fighting in Rif Damascus, Idleb, Dar'a and other governorates, humanitarian access has been further limited to some of these areas. In Idleb, infighting between the Al-Nusra Front - also known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham - and non-Nusra groups, has resulted in restricted humanitarian programming and civilian movement. On 24 January, UN assistance through Bab al-Hawa border crossing point was suspended for a day due to increased insecurity and humanitarian actors restricted their programming for most of the last week of January, affecting two million people in Idlib governorate, including 900,000 IDPs. To the south, the Ar-Ramtha border crossing point has been suspended since 13 February due to the intensification of attacks in and around Dar'a city. Fighting in the south also resulted in the displacement of more than 10,000 people from Dar'a city, many of whom have moved to farms and villages south east of the city. Additional people are likely to be displaced in the coming days if the violence continues. These displacements create further strain on a population already deeply affected by the conflict. In addition to these displacements, ongoing movements into Idleb and the western Aleppo country side - due to evacuations and local agreements - are increasing the humanitarian needs in many of these locations.

In the besieged Four Towns of Al-Zabadani, Al-Fu'ah, Kafraya and Madaya - last reached on 28 November - the situation is catastrophic, with over 64,000 civilians trapped in a cycle of daily violence and deprivation, where malnutrition and lack of proper medical care continue; a situation compounded by the tit-for-tat arrangement between the Four Towns, which makes humanitarian access prone to painstaking negotiations that are rooted in political and opportunistic considerations, rather than humanitarian principles and obligations. Five people



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have died in Madaya and Kefraya in recent days. Among them, a mother who died while giving birth. Another 80 people need to be urgently evacuated if their lives are to be saved. These and other people are in dire need, they cannot wait any longer, and I truly hope that members of this Council and members of the newly established Joint Group will manage to unlock this horrific gridlock on the Four Towns and compel parties on the ground to enable immediate humanitarian assistance, including medical evacuations, without any further delay.

Mr. President,

I also remain gravely concerned that military operations against ISIL continue to result in civilian suffering. In recent weeks, for example, airstrikes and fighting around both Ar-Raqqa and Al-Bab resulted in numerous civilian casualties, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, as well as displacement. To date, the UN has received reports of approximately 300 civilians killed, mainly due to airstrikes and improvised explosive devices. Civilians have also been subjected to gunfire by fighters, with ISIL fighters shooting at civilians who try to leave towards areas controlled by non-State armed groups, and – in some cases – NSAGs shooting at civilians who appear to have been mistaken for ISIL elements. As different parties pick up the pace to enter into Raqqa and Al-Bab, and as ISIL retreats, bridges, water systems and other civilian infrastructure are being attacked and destroyed. The Tabqah dam on the Euphrates River is a strategic facility in Syria which holds about 14 billion cubic meters of water for drinking and irrigation purposes and produces about 2.5 billion kW of electricity per year. Such a facility must be protected from the impacts of the ongoing conflict in the eastern and northern regions where any damage or misuse of the dam could potentially risk significant flooding across Raqqa and as far as Deir ez-Zor should the dam fail. Heavy flooding would likely have catastrophic humanitarian consequences in downstream areas, submerging huge swathes of agricultural land, and affecting hundreds of thousands of people who already face critical problems in meeting their immediate needs. And as fighting moves into urban areas, there is grave concern that there will be a significant increase in civilian casualties. In recognition that civilians trapped in areas controlled by listed terrorist groups are already facing human rights abuses and humanitarian suffering, efforts to retake such areas must be undertaken with the upmost care for the plight of the many hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped in these locations.

Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

As you all know, the UN and its implementing partners reach millions of Syrians via regular and cross-border programming each month. The lack of safe, unimpeded and sustained access remains, however, the greatest obstacle to reaching people in need in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. The cumulative reach of humanitarian actors to besieged and hard-to-reach areas through inter-agency convoys and airdrops increased from 620,000 in 2015 to more than 3.3 million in



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2016. Yet, despite this considerable improvement, humanitarian actors are all too seldom able to deliver life-saving assistance and protection services in a timely, effective and strictly needs-based on a sustained basis. A review of inter-agency cross-border convoys in 2016 showed that a lack of predictable access prevented the implementation of two-thirds of the requests initially approved by the Government of Syria. These were primarily due to administrative, security and operational constraints. During the second half of 2016, inter-agency convoys were only allowed to proceed during the last ten working days of the month. And those convoys that did deploy had medical items routinely removed. In fact, 67 of the 99 inter-agency cross-line convoys in 2016 had a significant number of medical items removed.

As previously stated, in December last year, only one convoy was deployed throughout the month, to Khan Elshieh reaching 6,000 people, despite the fact that the UN had received initial approvals to reach almost 800,000 people in hard-to-reach and besieged locations. Similarly, in January, only a single convoy could be deployed, delivering aid to 40,000 people in Madamiyet el Sham. And so far, in February, only two convoys have been able to deploy - to Talbiseh on 5 February delivering aid to 84,000, and to Ar-Rastan on 12 with assistance to 107,500 people.

Insecurity has also forced the United Nations to abort two convoys in as many days to Al Waer this past week. Some 50,000 civilians in Al Wa'er are facing ever-worsening humanitarian conditions and have not received humanitarian assistance for 117 days. On 19 February, the loaded convoy was forced to turn around due to the security situation on the ground, including an incident in which a person was injured due to a shot by a sniper. On 20 February, prior to reaching Al Wa'er, the loaded convoy was unable to proceed due to ongoing shelling and sporadic fire. On its way back to the warehouse, several trucks filled with humanitarian supplies were diverted by civilians and unknown armed elements to a Government-controlled area. The drivers and trucks were temporarily detained, and some drivers were reportedly roughed up, but have since been released, without humanitarian supplies, and everyone is safe and accounted for. I condemn this incident in the strongest possible terms and am shocked at the blatant disregard for the protection of humanitarian workers and humanitarian assets. The UN will continue to try and reach the 50,000 people in need in Al Wa'er with multi-sectoral assistance, as soon as conditions allow. I call on all parties to ensure the safety and security of humanitarian workers and assets at all times, in line with their responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

Mr. President, distinguished Council members,

I once again urge all Member States with influence to ensure that a zero or near-zero implementation rate does not occur again in the weeks and months to come, whether that's because of administrative, security or operational constraints. The United Nations and its partners are ready and capable of delivering humanitarian assistance in challenging conditions to



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300,000 people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas per week, in addition to regular programming supporting millions. We must be given the chance to do so, as the lives of many depend upon regular and unimpeded deliveries of humanitarian assistance. What we need are timely approvals and simplified approval procedures. In this regard, and in response to the request of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator in early January as well as sustained advocacy at the level of the Humanitarian Task Force, we received commitments on the part of the Government of Syria that procedures for cross-line convoys would be simplified. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent was to now act as the main entry point for the facilitation of convoys with government entities. We are now waiting to receive the final proposed procedural changes in writing for review. We sincerely hope that these changes will effectively address some of the bureaucratic bottlenecks that have caused the many delays in the past.

Let me also reiterate that cross-border assistance from Turkey and Jordan continues to represent a core element of the humanitarian response. This is especially important since needs are growing as local agreements are sending more people to the north as well as some locations in southern Syria – locations which are already strained by the current IDP population, with 900,000 IDPs in Idlib Governorate alone for example. Consequently, the UN and partners cross-border deliveries have steadily increased since the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014) in July 2014. That same year, 624 trucks were inspected before crossing the border into Syria, of which 172 trucks crossed into Syria via Ar-Ramtha (Jordan), 120 trucks via Bab al-Salam (Turkey), and 332 trucks via Bab al-Hawa (Turkey). One year later, numbers rose to more than 4,882 trucks. And last year, in 2016, 6,587 trucks were inspected, of which 1,278 trucks crossed the border point of Ar-Ramtha (Jordan), 495 trucks entered Syria via Bab al-Salam (Turkey), and 4,814 trucks via Bab al-Hawa (Turkey). I would also like to specifically point out that the bulk of our humanitarian response has been implemented by a vast panoply of NGO partners on the ground. They must be protected at all times and under all circumstances.

Mr. President,

Let me conclude by saying this: The eyes of all of Syria, and the eyes of the world, are looking to Geneva. As has been stated so many times already, there is no humanitarian or military solution to this conflict. A genuine political commitment to peace will be needed if 2017 is to offer any different prospect than the death and destruction of the past six years. Millions of battered and beleaguered women, men and children depend on meaningful action and the constructive engagement by the Syrian parties and their allies, starting tomorrow at the intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva, to assure Syrians that an end to the conflict may finally be within reach.

Thank you Mr. President.